

The Vittoriale degli Italiani (Gardone Riviera, Italy)

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Located in Gardone Riviera on the Brescian shore of Lake Garda, *Il Vittoriale degli Italiani* is a monumental estate that served as the final residence of Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938), one of Italy's most influential and controversial literary figures. More than just a home, *Il Vittoriale* is an architectural and artistic manifesto, embodying D'Annunzio's identity as a poet, soldier, aesthete and nationalist. Conceived as both a private sanctuary and a public monument, it remains one of the world's most visited writers' houses.

The origins of *Il Vittoriale* date back to 1921, when D'Annunzio, following his occupation of Fiume (1919-1920), withdrew from public life and settled in Gardone Riviera. He rented an eighteenth-century farmhouse, Villa Cargnacco, which was formerly owned by art historian Henry Thode and confiscated during the war. A government decree in April 1921 transferred ownership of the villa to local authorities, enabling D'Annunzio to purchase the property and its surrounding land. Determined to ideologize the estate and, as he put it, rid it of its German influences, he embarked on an ambitious transformation project. Working closely with architect Gian Carlo Maroni, D'Annunzio reshaped the estate into a labyrinthine complex of buildings, gardens, monuments, and relics, designed to immortalize his life and ideals. On 22 December 1923, he officially donated the estate – now named *Il Vittoriale* recalling the *Vittoriano*, the Altar of the Fatherland in Rome dedicated to King Victor Emmanuel II – to the Italian state. This ensured government funding for the estate while allowing him to retain control over its development (Andreoli, 2004, p. 22).

In his act of donation, D'Annunzio expressed his desire to offer everything he owned – and everything he would acquire in the future – to the Italian people, not simply as material wealth but as a legacy of his “immortal spirit”. He presented the Vittoriale as the embodiment of his “love for Italy”, his “cult of memories”, his “aspiration to heroism” and his “foreboding of the future *patria*” (D'Annunzio, 2005, pp. 2930-2931). He asserted that just as his body would one day belong to Italy, he wished for his life's work to remain as a testament to his passion and dedication to the nation. The donation was later formalized through various legal acts, including a decree on 28 May 1925 that declared the Vittoriale a national monument. On 17 July 1937, *Il Vittoriale* became a foundation governed by a president and a council appointed by the Italian head of state. This decree took effect the day after D'Annunzio's death on 1 March 1938. Its first president, Arrigo Solmi, stayed in charge until 1940. More recently, the position has been held by scholars such as Francesco Perfetti (1993-1997), Annamaria Andreoli (1997-2008) and Giordano Bruno Guerri (2008-today).

Between 1922 and 1935, D'Annunzio expanded his estate, acquiring properties such as Villa Mirabella and the abandoned Hotel Washington. At its heart lies the *Prioria*,

his personal residence, where visitors can get insight into his life. D'Annunzio saw the home as an extension of the self, a space where objects held metaphysical meaning and connected inhabitants to a transcendent reality shaped by memory and sensation. Influenced by Renaissance humanism, his approach drew from mnemonic techniques, such as the use of Latin and Italian mottos, transforming his house into a "theater of memory" (Re, 1987) filled with meaningful artifacts. However, in making his final residence into a material expression of his persona, D'Annunzio fixed his fluid identity into something static, ultimately turning his home into monumental museum (Hendrix, 2008).

The *Prioria* houses approximately 10.000 objects and 33.000 books and consists of over 20 rooms and corridors, each with its own name and purpose. The *Stanza della Leda*, D'Annunzio's bedroom, is an opulent display of art and collectibles, including Chinese ceramics, Persian plates, sculptures by Renato Brozzi, as well as a cast of Michelangelo's *Prigione morente*. The *Officina*, his study, is designed in the style of Renaissance *studioli* and serves as a repository for his books and manuscripts. Unlike the rest of the dimly lit *Prioria*, this room is flooded with natural light. The *Zambracca*, an antechamber to his bedroom, functioned as D'Annunzio's dressing room, as well as his final retreat at the end of the day. In this room, at his writing desk, he suffered a fatal cerebral hemorrhage.

Beyond the *Prioria*, the estate's gardens – named Italy's most beautiful park in 2012 – are replete with relics of Italy's military past. Here, war is aestheticized and transformed from a historical event into a myth of D'Annunzio's life and Italy's history. Visitors can admire the *Regia Nave Puglia*, a decommissioned warship and the *MAS 96*, a motor torpedo boat D'Annunzio famously used during his *Beffa di Buccari* raid in 1918. Both vessels were gifted to him by Admiral Thaon di Revel in 1923 for his sixtieth birthday. The Mausoleum, designed as D'Annunzio's final resting place, features his marble tomb, designed by Gian Carlo Marino, at its center, surrounded by the graves of most loyal legionaries of the Fiume Occupation, including Giuseppe Piffer (1894-1930), Antonio Locatelli (1895-1936), Riccardo Gigante (1881-1945).

During D'Annunzio's lifetime, his estate already attracted visitors from around the world, as well as schoolchildren eager to catch a glimpse of Italy's reclusive war hero and national poet (Andreoli, 2004, p. 29). Today, *Il Vittoriale* is one of the leading institutions for D'Annunzio studies in Italy, alongside the Centro Nazionale di Studi Dannunziani in Pescara. It also remains a major cultural attraction, welcoming hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. In 2018, it saw 265.146 visitors, and despite a drop during the COVID-19 pandemic, with 179.047 visitors in 2021, it reached a record 303.126 visitors in 2024. The estate hosts a variety of academic and cultural events, including conferences, theater performances, and the *Tener-a-mente* music festival, held in the amphitheater. First completed in 1952, the amphitheater was recently renovated with Verona red marble, aligning with D'Annunzio's original

vision. In recent years, several museums have been inaugurated on-site. The *Museo D'Annunzio Segreto*, opened in 2010, showcases the poet's private world through personal items such as clothing, jewelry, desk accessories, and even his dogs' collars and personal perfume. The *Museo L'Automobile è Femmina*, established in 2017, celebrates D'Annunzio's love for cars as symbols of modernity, displaying his most cherished vehicles, such as the Isotta Fraschini Tipo 8B and the FIAT Tipo 4, which he used during the occupation of Fiume. The estate also organizes exhibitions, such as "Dante e D'Annunzio" in 2021 and "Umberto Boccioni. Dipinti e disegni inediti" in 2024, reinforcing its status as a living, cultural institution on Lake Garda.

As a monument to D'Annunzio's poetics and ideology, *Il Vittoriale* has been subject to shifting interpretations, often related to the poet's complex role in the intellectual genealogy of Fascism and his ambiguous relationship with Mussolini. Mario Praz described it as a "vast Pantheon" that reflects the "pathetic involution of a sensualist" (Praz, 1951, pp. 388-389). In 1982, Fred Licht argued that it embodied Fascism, calling it "at once the tomb, the Luna Park and the sinister torture chamber of Fascism" (Licht, 1982, p. 318). He claimed that the conditions that made Fascism possible, along with its distinct characteristics were epitomized within the estate: the glorification of war, the worship of machinery, and the celebration of the *Übermensch*. More recently, in *Donker Toerisme: Reizen door het Europa van de 20^{ste} eeuw* (2022, *Dark Tourism: Traveling Through 20th-Century Europe*), the Belgian scholar Luc Rasson, describes his visit to D'Annunzio's estate as part of his broader investigation of how nations and individuals deal with the dark history of the twentieth century and the memory of a difficult past. His impressions challenge Licht's view of the site as a Fascist monument. Rasson notes that the estate's excessive ornamentation, eclecticism, and collage-like composition diverge from the streamlined, rational aesthetics of Fascist architecture. Rather than seeing *Il Vittoriale* as a rigid Fascist monument, he interprets it as an extravagant tribute to the early twentieth-century *Zeitgeist*: an architectural spectacle infused with proto-Fascist elements but ultimately shaped by D'Annunzio's highly personal culture, a testament to one man's relentless desire to leave an indelible mark on history.

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